

Chapter 32

Interdisciplinary Team Teaching (ITT) in the ACS Athens American Studies Combo

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ABSTRACT

The “Combo,” as it is popularly known at ACS Athens, is a team-taught American Studies interdisciplinary English and Social Studies course in which students are heterogeneously grouped in a unique blended learning environment. With differentiated instruction, teachers use a wide range of strategies to engage students of all abilities and backgrounds. Over two decades in the making, the integrated team-taught course instructors apply a constructivist approach, inquiry-based learning, collaborative structures, the latest technology, and creative approaches to engage students in the development of 21st century skills. This chapter traces the philosophy behind interdisciplinary team-teaching (ITT) at ACS Athens and its theoretical and research-based underpinnings to provide unique insights into its benefits and challenges. Three units of study are presented to illustrate organic differentiation, innovated blended teaching strategies, and formative and summative assessments in blended and virtual learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

“Real world problems rarely arise within orderly disciplinary categories, and neither do solutions” (Palmer, 2001).

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Interdisciplinary Team Teaching (ITT) in the ACS Athens American Studies Combo

The ‘Combo’, as it is popularly known at ACS Athens, is the required American Studies course for all students in the tenth grade. It is a team-taught, interdisciplinary English and Social Studies course in which students are heterogeneously grouped in a unique blended learning environment (i²Flex). Since the student population at ACS Athens is quite diverse, these tenth-grade classes include students of varying English language abilities, students with specific learning challenges, students who are intellectually advanced, and there may be as many as 15 nationalities represented in the class, as well. The course is offered for standard or honors level credit and carries two credits, English and Social Studies. With differentiated instruction, teachers use a wide range of pedagogical strategies, such as tiering and collaborative group work to engage students of all abilities and backgrounds.

The American Community Schools of Athens is a private, non-profit, pre-K-12 institution, which has served the children of the American, international and local communities in Athens since 1945 and is accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools under the Sustaining Excellence Protocol. The Academy is a comprehensive four-year high school enrolling 400 students in grades nine through twelve. All graduates of the ACS Athens Academy (grades 9-12) earn a United States High School Diploma and follow a college preparatory course of study. Students may also graduate from the ACS Athens Academy with the International Baccalaureate Diploma and with a Greek high school equivalency diploma (*ACS Athens Academy School Profile*, 2019).

At ACS Athens Students engage in a tech rich environment, through a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) program, and are additionally supported with two technology labs and a state of the art media center. The faculty has vast teaching experience averaging over 20 years (*ACS Athens Academy School Profile*, 2019). Notably, interdisciplinary team teaching (ITT) has expanded at ACS Athens to become the primary mode of instruction for English and Social Studies in the lower academy grades.

Differentiation: Instrumental to Our Mission

Novice and expert teachers alike recognize the need for differentiation and its benefits in the brick-and-mortar classroom (Beck & Beasley, 2020). There is an abundance of research into how teachers use the principles of differentiation to make decisions in response to the needs of all students (Tomlinson, 2001; Tomlinson & Cooper, 2005; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). However, there is little research about or experience with differentiation in the virtual classroom. In 2020, schools closed due to the global pandemic and teachers around the world have been breaking new ground in order to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities for differentiation in the online environment.

Differentiated instruction is the facilitation of the teacher in partnership with the students’ needs in a process that is guided by the learning goals (Tomlinson, 2017). Best practice of teachers engaged in this process involves: a) collecting information to formulate student profiles, b) cultivating a sense of community, c) grouping students flexibly, and d) using formative assessment to inform instruction (Beck & Beasley, 2020). School closings across the country required ACS teachers to adapt the high quality curriculum, rethink collaborative learning, try out new digital tools, and modify assessments in order to continue to meet the needs of the diverse student population in the virtual school. In the ITT courses, such as the Combo, expert teachers were already using methods from different disciplines to facilitate differentiation of curriculum and instruction in a blended learning environment. Transitioning the course to completely online teaching and learning presented new challenges and opportunities.

The Combo class includes collaborative and integrated assessments providing diverse avenues through which students can exhibit their knowledge. This level of differentiation is especially important con-

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